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## Gazette Opinion: Lack of seat belt use takes heavy toll in 2006

With just two weeks left, 2006 is on track to go down as a bad year for Montana traffic fatalities. The state recorded more fatalities in 2005 than in 2004 and 2006 has been worse yet. At least 249 people have died on Montana roads, nine more than at the same time last year, according to preliminary data from the Montana Highway Patrol.

Alcohol and speed remain factors in dozens of these deaths, but the most common, preventable risk in Montana highway deaths is failure to use a seat belt. In 2005, 73 percent of motor vehicle occupants killed in Montana crashes were unbelted. That percentage is virtually unchanged in 2006 statistics.

Although most Montanans use seat belts, the unbelted minority accounts for the majority of fatal injuries.

### Uncompensated care

Deaths aren't the only measure of the terrible cost of not using seat belts. In 2005, 61 percent of spinal cord injuries from Montana motor vehicle crashes were suffered by unbelted motorists, according to the Montana State Trauma Bank. The unbelted patients were hospitalized longer and upon discharge, 25 percent of them were transferred to a rehabilitation center or nursing home.

Billings hospitals report providing \$2.2 million in uncompensated care last year to motor vehicle crash victims who hadn't been wearing seat belts. According to data compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the average hospital charge for a motor vehicle crash victim treated in Billings hospitals last year was \$20,709 for those wearing seat belts, \$48,692 for those not belted. That figure doesn't include rehabilitation, ambulance, lost time from work, outpatient or future treatment or any other costs to the community. NHTSA points out that unbelted persons were 5.5 times more likely to require hospitalization.

### Seat belt legislation

The Montana Legislature next month will, once again, be asked to strengthen the state's seat belt law by making it a "primary" law, enforceable like other traffic laws. For now, Montana has a "secondary" law which means that law enforcement officers can't cite a seat belt violation unless they stop a driver for some other violation first. Half of the 50 states have primary seat belt laws. Montana, in the half without primary laws, has a fatality rate two-and-a-half times the national average.